PUBLIC TENDER
CALL OF INTEREST SMEs IN THE BLUE ECONOMY TO ACCESS THE DIGITAL TRANSORMATION SERVICES OFFERED BY BEST 4.0 PROJECT

WHO CAN PARTECIPATE : SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES (SMEs) OPERATING IN THE BLUE ECONOMY SECTOR

Date of publication: *15.12.2025.*

Date of deadline *31.01.2026.*

INTRODUCTION - REGIONAL CALL

This Call for Interest is published at regional level by DIH AGRIFOD CROATIA within the framework of the Interreg VI-A Italy–Croatia 2021–2027 Programme.

The Call specifically addresses Italian SMEs located in the Programme area, with the aim of facilitating their access to the digital transformation services developed by the BEST 4.0 partnership.

DIH AGRIFOD CROATIA, as regional implementing body, is responsible for launching this notice, selecting the beneficiary companies and coordinating the provision of services on the Programme area.

1. TERMS OF REFERENCES

BEST4.0 – *Blue Economy Sectors Digital Transformation towards Industry 4.0*, is a project funded by the Interreg VI-A Italy-Croatia 2021–2027 programme under Priority 1.1 – *Sustainable growth in the Blue Economy*. The project started on **February 1st, 2024** and will end on **July 31st, 2026**, for a total duration of 30 months.

The project partnership includes 8 organisations (Digital Innovation Hubs, Business Support Organisations, Universities and Development Agencies) from both Italy and Croatia.

- CNA FERRARA
- CNA ANCONA
- CETMA
- AREA SCIENCE PARK
- Croatian Chamber of Economy
- Istrian Development Agency - IDA Ltd.
- ASSOCIATION DIH AGRIFOOD CROATIA
- University of Rijeka, Faculty of Maritime Studies

Further information is available on the project website:

🔗 https://www.italy-croatia.eu/web/best40

and on the partners' websites.

2. OBJECTIVE OF THE CALL

The objective of this call is to select and engage SMEs based in the Italy–Croatia Programme area for testing of selected Industry 4.0 services, as foreseen by the BEST4.0 project. These services are designed to support business innovation, digital transformation, and capacity building.

As part of BEST4.0 Activity 2.3 ("Calling for Future's Digital Environment within the Blue Economy"), DIH AGRIFOOD CROATIA is launching this **Call for Interest to** identify and engage **10 SMEs** from the Croatian side of the cooperation area.

3. AIMS

The activity aims to support SMEs in the Blue Economy by:

- o Raising awareness of the opportunities of Industry 4.0;
- o Facilitating access to innovative services in digitalization, product and process innovation;
- o Providing tailored services in business strategy, AR/VR, AI, robotics, additive manufacturing, and skills development.

4. WHO CAN PARTICIPATE

Eligible applicants are **Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs)**, as defined by EU Regulation 651/2014, Art. 2(24) and Annex I):

- operating in the **Blue Economy sector** (e.g. maritime transport, fisheries, aquaculture, coastal and maritime tourism, shipbuilding and related services, marine biotechnology, renewable marine energy);
- with **legal and operational headquarters located within the Italian territory** of the **Interreg Italy–Croatia Programme area**.
- Be in possession of the TML assessment, generated through the processing of the Questionnaire for SMEs of the Blue Economy Sector and specifically developed for the BEST 4.0 project, is mandatory for each enterprise. The same questionnaire will be repeated at the end of the support activities.
- No ongoing legal disputes or judicial constraints.
  - o SME status (as defined in EU Regulation 651/2014, Art. 2(24) and Annex I);
  - o Operating in the Blue Economy sector (based on ATECO/NACE code or clear sector description, e.g., sustainable tourism);
  - o Legal and operational headquarters located within the Italy–Croatia Programme area;

Applications will be ranked by date and time of receipt. A maximum of 10 SMEs will be selected per region.

5. METHOD OF IMPLEMENTATION

The partners organised local Info Days and consultation activities as supporting actions.

Workshops will be used as a tool to disseminate the Service Catalogue already developed within the BEST 4.0 project. Participation in these workshops is considered useful to increase awareness and facilitate understanding of the available services, but it is not mandatory in order to apply to this Call.

The Call concerns only the Industry 4.0 services made available to SMEs that will formally submit an application and will be selected according to the criteria defined in this document.

Application procedure:

Required documents

Interested SMEs must complete and submit the application form available at the following link: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1IGkFn-rqGFDkqieQuEhhUVSl5sGfg21dVCZCD3oRclM/edit?sharingaction=ownershiptransfer&ts=69303a1a

For the purposes of the application, the date and time of submission of the online form will be considered as the official reference.

Before final submission of the form, applicants will be able to download a declaration, which must be:

- completed and signed by the legal representative of the SME;

- sent by email to bruna@agrifoodcroatia.com or nikolina@agrifoodcroatia.com within 10 days from the submission of the application form;

Applications not fulfilling these requirements within the given deadlines will not be considered eligible.

Deadline: 31.01.2026.

Notification of selection: within 10 working days from the SMEs participation will be confirmed after the selection procedure closing process, the communication to the JS of the candidates and the inclusion of them in the National Register of the State Aid.

6. SERVICES PROVIDED BY PROJECT PARTNERS

The complete BEST4.0 Service Catalogue is annexed to this call and is also available for open consultation online on the official project website and partners' websites.

The services will be provided free of charge by all BEST4.0 project partners and will be accessible to selected SMEs based on their geographical area and declared priorities. The services are grouped into the following three categories:

- **A. Business Improvement Services**
  (e.g., Strategic Design, Branding, Business Model Innovation, IP Support, etc.)

- **B. Industry 4.0 Application Services**
  (e.g., Augmented and Virtual Reality, Digital Twin, Artificial Intelligence, Additive

Manufacturing, Robotics, etc.)
- **C. Capacity Building Services**
(e.g., Training, Mentorship, Networking, Digital Skills Development, etc.)

A complete catalogue of services provided by each project partner is annexed to this Call.

7. SELECTION RULES AND CRITERIA

Rule 1 – Number of Participants and Selection Process

A maximum of **10 SMEs** will be selected under this Call.

- The selection will be carried out on a **first-come, first-served basis**, among those applicants that meet all eligibility criteria.
- Among the selected SMEs, **up to 10% (i.e., 1 SME)** will be entitled to access cross border services

  If no selected SME indicates internationalisation among its top service priorities, the quota may be reassigned to the next eligible applicant.

Rule 2 – Geographical Scope and Prioritization of Services

Each SME must clearly indicate, in the application form:

1. **Its geographical area of interest** for service delivery, choosing among:
   - Regional (services provided within the SME's own region)
   - National (services provided within the Italian territory of the Programme area)
   - International (cross-border services, subject to the 10% quota rule)

   Priority: where the same service is available both at regional and national level, service delivery at the **regional** level will be given priority. National services will be activated only if the regional option is not available or as a complement.

Rule 3 – Type of Services and Prioritization

During the application process, SMEs must rank the following service categories from 1 (most important) to 8 (least important):

1. Assessment and Digital Readiness Check
2. Feasibility Studies and Technical Validation
3. Customized Training and Capacity Building
4. Business Development and IP Strategy
5. Support to Funding Applications and EU Project Design
6. Test Before Invest (TBI e Demo)
7. Tailored Digital Marketing and Communication
8. Ecosystem Positioning and Policy Engagement

If the SME fails to provide its prioritization, the regional partner will define the services to be delivered based on the company profile and the results of the Digital Readiness Assessment.

Rule 4 – SME requirements and commitments

- Each SME must declare whether it has already completed the **Digital Readiness Assessment**. If not, this assessment must be completed before the start of any service. The same questionnaire will be repeated at the end of the support activities.

- By submitting their application, SMEs commit to:
  - ensuring availability for the delivery of services;
  - actively cooperating with project partners;
  - providing all necessary information required for the proper implementation of the activities.

Applicants Selection Process

- Applications will be accepted in chronological order of submission, up to a maximum of 10.

- In case of applications submitted at the same time, preference will be given to the company whose owner is younger, or, alternatively, whose board of directors has a lower average age.

- To ensure territorial representativeness, priority will be given to the first 9 applicants from the Italian territories of the Programme and the first applicant from the Croatian territories.

- In the event of further equality, selection will be made by drawing lots.

The SMEs participation will be confirmed after the selection procedure closing process, the communication to the JS of the candidates and the inclusion of them in the National Register of the State Aid.

8. APPLICATION FORM

To participate, fill out the form at the following link: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1IGkFn-rqGFDkqieQuEhhUVSl5sGfg21dVCZCD3oRclM/edit?sharingaction=ownershiptransfer&ts=69303a1a

9. STATE AID AND MAXIMUM VALUE OF SERVICES

The State Aid corresponding to the cost of the services that the selected SMEs will receive will be granted pursuant to art. 20a of the EU Regulation GBER 651/2014; this benefit is an indirect aid and cannot be cumulated with de minimis aid or other forms of aid or tax credit under other European or national regulations currently in force already received for the same eligible cost.

The maximum value of services provided to each SME (corresponding to the amount of State Aid received) shall not exceed €10,000. This amount represents both the economic ceiling and the limit to the number of services that can be activated. The combination of selected services must therefore remain within this threshold. The final amount and type of services assigned will depend on the selection criteria, the availability of services in the relevant territory, and the prioritization indicated by the SME.

10. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

Participation requirements:

- Small and medium-sized enterprises operating in the nautical sector and similar services having their legal and operational seat in the area of the IT-HR Program are eligible to participate in the initiatives of this notice.
- A copy of the applicant's identification document must be attached to the expression of interest. (Upload copy of identification document).
- No participation fee will be requested to participants.

The services have the following estimated value for each participating SME:

Macro Area	Service	Partner	Value (€)	Priority
A. Business Improvement Services	Organizational Innovation Consultancy	PP1	2.000 €	4
	Digitalization Consultancy	PP1	2.000 €	1
	Management Consultancy	PP1	2.500 €	4
	Patents and Certifications Consultancy	PP1	1.500 €	4
	Support to Funding Application	PP1	2.000 €	5
	Analysis of internationalization potential	PP2	2.000 €	4
	Analytical company check-up (organizational and financial)	PP2	7.500 €	1
	Company valuation	PP2	8.000 €	2
	Support to Funding Application related to the above	PP2	2.000 €	5
	Feasibility studies	PP3	5.600 €	2
	Business Development	PP3	13.100 €	4
	Support to Funding Application	PP3	10.000 €	5
	IP Guidance	PP4	1.450 €	4
	Business development	PP4	2.900 €	4
	Support for Internationalization Strategy	PP4	1.450 €	8
	Organizing trainings and workshops	PP5	3.000 €	3
	Providing advisory services and information	PP5	600 €	5
	Solvency and Financial Condition Report of Croatian companies (SFCR)	PP5	41 €	1
	Tailored Digital Marketing Strategy	PP6	50 €	7
	Business Model Development (BMC)	PP6	100 €	4
	Digital Readiness Assessment	PP7	1.200 €	1
	SMEs Needs Analysis	PP7	1.200 €	1
	Tech Maturity Assessment	PP7	1.200 €	1
	Consulting and digital transformation support	PP8	1.000 €	1
	Executive education and customised programs	PP8	1.000 €	3
B. Industry 4.0 Application Services	Management Consultancy	PP1	2.500 €	2
	Support to Funding Application	PP1	2.000 €	5
	Technology Transfer Consultancy	PP1	3.000 €	2
	Analysis of digitalization and innovation maturity level	PP2	2.000 €	1
	Support to Funding Application related to the above	PP2	2.000 €	5
	Test Before Invest	PP3	15.000 €	6
	Digital Demonstration & Testing	PP4	5.500 €	6
	EU Funds Individual Consultations	PP5	450 €	5
	Professional Consultations	PP5	70 €	4
	Energy Savings Exchange	PP5	50 €	8

	B2B Networking	PP6	50 €	8
	AI & Machine Learning for SMEs: Pilot Testing AI – Powered water quality monitoring in aquaculture	PP7	3.500 €	6
	Pilot testing of Automation and Environmental Monitoring Solutions	PP7	3.500 €	6
	Custom Simulation Development	PP8	500 €	2
	Evaluation of Immersive Tools	PP8	500 €	2
C. Capacity Building Services	Support to Funding Application	PP1	2.000 €	5
	Matching the Business World with High-Level Skills and training courses	PP1	2.400 €	3
	Industry 4.0 Capacity Building Guidance	PP2	3.000 €	3
	Support to Funding Application related to the above	PP2	2.000 €	5
	Customized Training	PP3	4.650 €	3
	Consulting for Access to Research and Innovation Funding	PP4	1.900 €	5
	Education and training programs	PP5	3.000	3
	Individual Funding Consultation	PP6	50 €	5
	Coworking access (price for one day)	PP6	15 €	8
	Digital Readiness Check	PP6	50 €	1
	Group Workshop: Access to EU Funding	PP6	50 €	5
	Eligibility Assessment for EU Calls	PP6	50 €	5
	Mentorship Program	PP6	100 €	3
	Industry 4.0 Trends & Insights Seminars (price for single participant)	PP7	150 €	8
	Maritime Competence Workshops	PP8	600 €	3
	VR Training	PP8	600 €	3

The priorities marked with a number from 1 to 8 correspond to the types of services listed in section 7 "SELECTION RULES AND CRITERIA", under rule 3.

Priority	Type of Services
1	Assessment and Digital Readiness Check
2	Feasibility Studies and Technical Validation
3	Customized Training and Capacity Building
4	Business Development and IP Strategy
5	Support to Funding Applications and EU Project Design
6	Test Before Invest (TBI e Demo)
7	Tailored Digital Marketing and Communication
8	Ecosystem Positioning and Policy Engagement

Full name of the project partners corresponding to the acronyms used in the table.

PPs	Name of the Organization
PP1	CNA FERRARA

PP2	CNA ANCONA
PP3	CETMA
PP4	AREA SCIENCE PARK
PP5	Croatian Chamber of Economy
PP6	Istrian Development Agency - IDA Ltd.
PP7	ASSOCIATION DIH AGRIFOOD CROATIA
PP8	University of Rijeka, Faculty of Maritime Studies

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11. PRIVACY DATA

Pursuant to and for the purposes of Legislative Decree 196/2003, the personal data acquired will be processed, also with the aid of electronic means, guaranteeing absolute confidentiality and exclusively for the purposes related to this notice. For further details see Privacy attachment.

12. INFORMATION AND DISSEMINATION

This advice is available on the official project web site https://www.italy-croatia.eu/web/best40 and on the websites of the project partners. Communication and promotion will also be carried out through announcements and posts on the official social media channels of the project and its partners..

A final report will list the innovation services outlined during this activity with the inclusion of info modules, presentation, videos, and all related material, in an open format, to be published on the following project online media instruments:

- the Italy – Croatia Programme, Project's Website;

- Official Project YouTube Channel;

- *other*